



# A SALUTE TO THE GREAT LAND

THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY of the Alaska Purchase offers myriad reasons to celebrate

**AT FIRST** the Alutiiq group on stage at Fairbanks' midwinter Festival of Native Arts renders an authentic Alaska Native dance presentation. Agile young men up front perform the stylized, bent-knee steps and arm sweeps that symbolize various aspects of life along the North Pacific coast, while behind them elders rap willow sticks on walrus-skin drums. The dancers mime bird hunting, snow-shaping and baidarka paddling, and the drums roll strong like the heartbeat of a whale. ¶ Then something unexpected happens: The cadence shifts subtly, and the performers in front drop into a Cossack kick-dance, complete with whoops and cries straight from the steppes of Russia. I gawk in surprise and wonder, but it's just one of a thousand such memorably unexpected moments I've enjoyed in America's 49th state.



BY ERIC LUCAS



Wonder Lake offers a grand perspective on Denali and the Alaska Range. Previous page: The \$7.2 million check for the Alaska Purchase was issued several months after the treaty was signed on March 30, 1867.



Six months later, in the shimmering waters of the Inside Passage near Sitka, some 600 miles south and east of Fairbanks, a crowd gathers on the bow of a small cruise boat to witness one of nature’s most spectacular and engaging sights. A half-dozen humpback whales are bubble-net fishing, using underwater exhalations to corral schools of herring, then soaring upward, mouths agape, to strain the fish from the water. Whales are a common summer sight in Southeast Alaska, but seeing this spectacle from 50 yards away is beyond comparison—not least because the ship simply happened to be sailing past, and the whales have chosen to stay put after our captain cut the engines. ¶ Welcome to Alaska, aka The Great Land, which the United States agreed to purchase from Russia on March 30, 1867. As we commemorate the 150th anniversary of the deal that brought Alaska into the United States, what was once called “Seward’s Folly” has proven to be one of America’s most dynamic adventures, a \$7.2 million idea championed by a 19th-century titan just after the end of the Civil War. Then and now, Secretary of State William H. Seward—diplomat and empire-builder—bears a colorful, outsized legacy that marvelously matches the state, and his role in bringing Alaska into the U.S. is his greatest legacy. Seward’s purchase seemed fruitless until the Klondike gold rush brought fortune seekers north, but a pile of gold does not represent the present-day value of this unique land. Many of Alaska’s best facets are highly conspicuous and easily experienced by visitors.

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**D E N A L I**, North America’s highest pinnacle, reaches 20,310 feet, towering over the landscape like no other mountain on earth. I have never seen anything more impressive than its ivory ramparts climbing skyward from the north side at Wonder Lake, in Denali National Park. Travelers from around the world visit Alaska each summer seeking a chance to gaze at the massive



Grizzly bears are among 38 species of mammals found in Denali National Park.

MICHAEL DEYOUNG/ALASKA STOCK

mountain, which flirts with admirers in and out of cloud formations that change rapidly in dynamic weather.

At 570,640 square miles, Alaska is bigger than every country in Europe—save Russia. If you superimposed Alaska on the U.S., the most distant Aleutian island (Adak) would be in San Francisco, and Ketchikan would be in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. But with just over 740,000 residents, it is the least densely populated state. And, as Alaskans are fond of pointing out, if you divided the state in half, Texas would drop from second- to third-largest state in the Union.

**AS MANY AS 5 BILLION SALMON** ply the rich waters of the North Pacific each summer, and a large portion return to spawn in rivers and streams along Alaska’s 45,000 miles or so of tidal shoreline. Their faithful annual return to coastal streams is, as an ancient Native



An experienced paddleboarder explores Kenai Fjords National Park. Boat tours departing from Seward also offer park views.



Two girls sport Athabascan kuspuks in Nome.

Ketchikan's Saxman Native Village showcases Tlingit woodcarving skills.



In Sitka, Alaska Native culture influences Russian Orthodox traditions at St. Michael's.

prayer puts it, “the dream you gave to my grandfathers.” To this day, the annual return of 35 million or more sockeye salmon to Bristol Bay’s rivers and streams is the largest single salmon run on earth.

**RARELY DOES ONE SEE GEOLOGY** in action. But Alaska visitors witness just that every summer on the tour and cruise boats that sail near some of the state’s 27,000 glaciers. During the same cruise on which we marveled at bubble-netting whales, we all gathered again on the foredeck the next day to watch immense chunks of the Johns Hopkins Glacier drop into the sea in Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve. As is always the case, the spectators clapped and cheered.

The highest peak, the longest shoreline, the largest state, the biggest salmon run: Superlatives characterize Alaska. But there’s much more to it than that. Alaska holds complexities and subtleties of character that match any locale on Earth, aptly symbolized by that Native dance group I watched blend Russian traditions into its performance.

**THE CZARS’ EXPLORERS** who arrived here in the late 1700s to expand Romanov imperial ambitions left behind much more than signatures on a purchase treaty in 1867. Their descendants still flock to dozens of Russian

Orthodox churches, bear distinctly Slavic names, and are part of a population far more diverse than outsiders imagine. “Everybody thinks the Russians left. Not quite,” chuckles Father Michael of St. Michael’s Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Sitka. The thriving parish (and visitor attraction) boasts one of the finest icon collections in the Western Hemisphere, and conducts its business in English, Aleut, Yupik, Tlingit and Russian. (About 90 Russian Orthodox parishes thrive in Alaska.) Almost every summer day, Father Michael greets throngs of tourists who come to explore Sitka’s many attractions; invariably, he winds up explaining both the continuing strength of Russian heritage and the remarkable way it has blended with Native peoples and traditions.

“This is an intersection of three dynamic cultures,” adds Ryan Carpenter, a ranger at Sitka National Historical Park, referring to Russian, American and Alaska Native. True, but it’s actually much more than that. In fact, the Mountain View neighborhood in Anchorage is one of the most diverse census tracts in the entire United States, with its high school scoring 97 on a diversity scale that tops out at 100. Black, Hispanic, Native, Filipino, Pacific Islander and many, many more—the Anchorage School District registers 103 different languages spoken in its students’ homes.

And this rich human history is the side of Alaska I treasure most.

**YES, THIS IS A PLACE TO SEE WHALES** soar, bears fish salmon streams, glaciers, mountains and forests cloak the Earth. It is also home to one of the best tortilla factories on the West Coast. In Anchorage, Taco Loco’s production facility has a grocery outlet selling corn and flour tortillas, along with fresh salsa, salmon wraps, tamales and more. Meanwhile, the state’s millennia-old Native cultures are as culturally and economically dynamic as any in the world: Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, based in Barrow, America’s northernmost city, is a \$2.5 billion Iñupiat enterprise with 12,000

employees—Alaska’s largest locally owned business.

On the 150th anniversary of Seward’s purchase, Alaskans wonder what their state would be without America. As a frequent visitor who often relishes all the state has to offer, I submit for consideration a more compelling question that a Sitka historian posed to me: What would America be without Alaska? Lesser, for sure. 🇺🇸

*Seattle-based contributor ERIC LUCAS has visited Alaska more than 40 times and has written extensively about the state for numerous guidebooks and magazines.*



A humpback whale feeds in the pristine waters of Frederick Sound, off Admiralty Island.

JAMES + COURTNEY FORTE/GETTY IMAGES

GIRLS: JEFF SCHULTZ/GETTY IMAGES; CHURCH: JEFFREY WICKETT/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; WHALE: PAUL A. SOUDERS/GETTY IMAGES

**JOURNEY ONLINE:** Visit [wa.aaa.com/journey](http://wa.aaa.com/journey) to learn about top stops along the Alaska (aka Alcan) Highway, the 1,387-mile route stretching from Dawson Creek, British Columbia, to Delta Junction, Alaska.



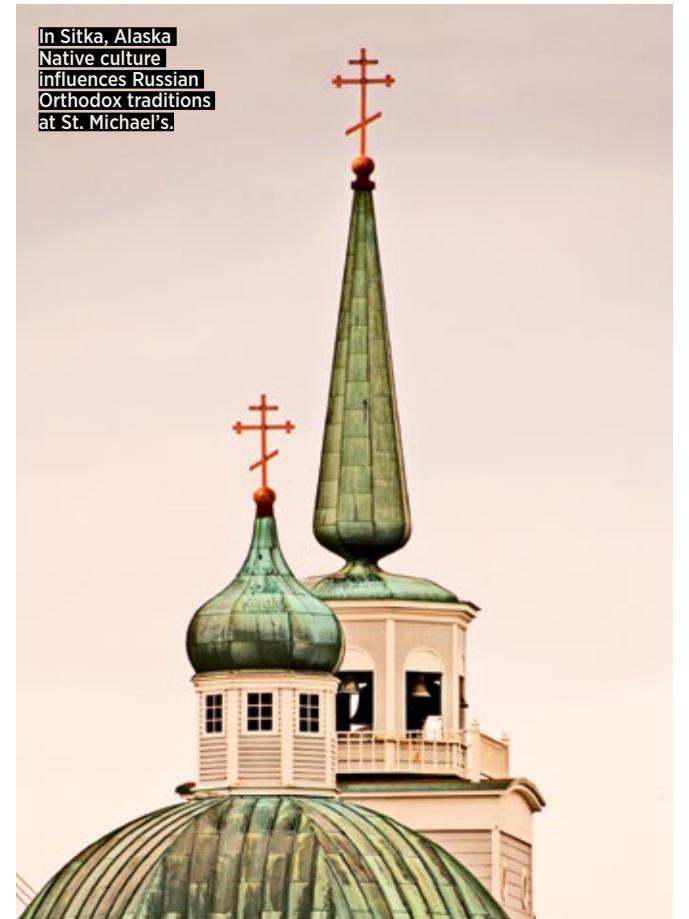
An experienced kayaker explores Southeast Alaska's Tracy Arm-Fords Terror Wilderness.



Three girls sport Athabascan *kuspuks* in Nome.



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A captain cuts the engines for a humpback whale off Admiralty Island.

JOHN HYDE/GETTY IMAGES

GIRLS: JEFF SCHULTZ/GETTY IMAGES; WHALE: ACCENT ALASKA.COM/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

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